

**The Rise of the Domestic Fair Trade Movement**  
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**by Chela Vázquez**

In the past 40 years, nearly four million small farmers have gone out of business in North America while big agribusiness firms have continued to thrive. Since 1995, under the North America Free Trade Agreement, there has been a 40% decrease in commodity prices paid to farmers while U.S. consumers have seen food costs soar 22%.

Against this background, more than 70 activists representing 41 organizations—farmers, farmworkers, traders, processors, retailers and fair-food advocates—gathered for the second annual meeting of the Domestic Fair Trade Association (DFTA) on December 7–8, 2008, at the Organic Valley Dairy in La Farge, Wisconsin.

Fair Trade was born in response to the failed promises of “Free Trade,” which has left millions of small farmers in poor countries unable to reach international markets. Under Fair Trade, these farmers can now sell their products (such as coffee and cocoa) at better prices in the affluent markets of industrialized nations.

Ronnie Cummins from the Organic Consumers Association stressed the need to convince consumers that, “instead of buying cheap, globally-sourced, throwaway [and] generally unhealthy” Free Trade products, social justice and fair are powerful words. We need to be respectful and careful that, when claims are made about justice and fairness, they are strong, rigorous and meaningful—especially for people who are the most oppressed and most in need in our society. — Richard Mandelbaum, CATA “organic and fairly traded products should be the norm, with local and regional production for local and regional markets whenever possible.”

Domestic Fair Trade incorporates principles that promote healthy, chemical-free foods that meet social justice standards. Elizabeth Henderson, a farmer from Peacework Farm in upstate New York and member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association, observed: “It has

always been my understanding that organic means fair relations for everybody in the food system. Fair Trade offers an opportunity to ensure that workers and producers get fair prices, respect, and decent wages, and the people who buy our products also get a fair deal.”

Grace Cox, from the Food Co-op in Olympia, Washington, said that DFTA membership helps distinguish the Co-op’s goods from giant food industry retailers that carry Fair Trade and organic products but oppose union organizing in their stores—a breach of DFTA principles. Cox (who is also a member of the National Co-op Grocers Association) added that, in some places, large retail organic stores have driven small co-ops out of business.

Farmworker participation in the DFTA ensures that Fair Trade benefits also extend to field workers.

Tirso Moreno from the Farmworker Association of Florida praised the DFTA for offering “the possibility that agricultural production can be sustainable and fair for both farmworkers and farmers.”

“We represent the sector that grows and brings food to the table and yet we endure the worst conditions. For food to be socially just, society needs to address farmworkers’ issues,” said Luis Tlaseca, a farmworker and coordinator for El Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (CATA), Pennsylvania’s Farmworker Support Committee. CATA President Carlos Diaz emphasized the importance of ensuring that fair food products also reach the tables of farmworkers. “Our work would be in vain if a high-quality product with social justice value enters the market and farmworker families cannot have access to it,” Diaz said.

Erik Esse from the Local Fair Trade Network in Minneapolis said that the campaign for local foods and fair trade stands in solidarity between the people who produce the food and the consumers. Michael Sligh from the Rural Advancement Foundation International summed up the Domestic Fair Trade movement’s goal: “Now is the time to bring Fair Trade home to address justice as well as environmental sustainability.”